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Opening up a Third Space: A pilot project to support and engage undergraduate exchange students

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we present the Third Space, a pilot project aiming to enhance students' intercultural engagement when moving abroad to study, volunteer or work and to facilitate their transition when returning 'home'. In 2013, a team of academic and student support staff at the University of Edinburgh developed a set of workshops and activities to support students before, during and upon return of living abroad: At a Weekend Retreat prior to departure, forty undergraduate students were introduced to ideas of intercultural engagement and reflexivity. This group was provided with a physical and online Toolbox of activities to employ while being abroad. Upon return (October 2015), these students will participate in a Welcome Home conference where they will share experiences and knowledge with peers and staff. In this paper we disseminate details of the Weekend Retreat, present our 'Toolbox' illustrated by examples of how the students have been using it so far and share our plans for developing the Third Space into a student-led, sustainable project. This discussion will be pertinent to students and staff interested in the Internationalisation of Higher Education, Global Citizenship and Intercultural Engagement.

Keywords: living abroad, intercultural engagement, reflexivity

1 Introduction

Opportunities for working, volunteering, and studying overseas are becoming a central element of UK Higher Education, as they promote the development of cultural awareness and 'global competences' that increase student employability, alongside improving the overall learning experience (Holmes et al., 2015, Messelink et al., 2015, Penman and Ratz, 2015). Nonetheless, it is widely reported that participation in international experiences on its own does not guarantee the development of intercultural awareness and competences (Byram and Dervin, 2008), neither does it improve employability (Messelink et al., 2015). What is essential for the maximization of the benefits of intercultural experiences, are well-designed training and support provisions (Jackson, 2014a).

Many UK universities run pre-departure seminars to prepare students and facilitate their transitions. Often, these seminars focus solely on the logistics of the upcoming visit abroad, such as financial issues, health measures and academic transfer procedures (Jackson, 2014a). In some cases, these seminars take the form of academic modules that include theoretical input, practical tasks and an assessment strategy, which the students undertake in preparation for their year abroad (e.g. Penman and Ratz, 2015). While an important step towards the students' preparation, such approaches cover only one phase of the intercultural experience, the pre-departure one. Research shows that more longitudinal approaches that

include pre-departure, sojourner and re-entry provisions offer more comprehensive support and improve student intercultural engagement (Jackson, 2014a). A small number of institutions endorse this longitudinal approach. For example, the Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers project, provide Intercultural Paths, i.e. sets of academic modules that students undertake before, during and after their experience abroad (IEREST, 2015).

This paper presents one such longitudinal provision, the 3rd Space Project, which was designed and piloted at the University of Edinburgh to support students' overseas experiences. The uniqueness of the 3rd Space lies both in its focus and its method of delivery. In terms of focus, the emphasis is on enhancing the quality of the students' intercultural experience by inviting an exploration into the everyday life of the 'host' place. In this sense, the project does not only engage with the practicalities of living and studying abroad; it encourages students to familiarise themselves with the ways and habits of other people beyond the compass of the normal experience of the visitor. In terms of delivery, this processes of exploration, whilst initiated by the provision of a 3rd space toolbox (see below) and pre-departure workshop, takes place within a learner-centered pedagogical framework that allows for the creation of a virtual and actual community of intercultural "explorers", constituted in the sharing of stories and experiences.

The aim of the 3rd space programme is, therefore, to enrich students' intercultural experience through a self-guided and peer-supported process of intercultural exploration, inspired in part by ethnographic sensibilities. Moreover, by incorporating a virtual environment in which students can narrate their adventures, tell stories about specific events and encounters and reflect on their experiences, these explorations can be documented in a form that allows integration into more structured schemes of accreditation and evidenced-based approaches to documenting processes of continuous learning. We hope that by disseminating the philosophy, structure, content and interim outcome of the 3rd Space Project, we will contribute to the dialogue on international transitions and improve student support and training in relation to intercultural awareness and engagement in Higher Education contexts.

2 The Third Space Pilot

The Third Space Pilot (3rd SP) is a project developed by a group of academic and support services staff at the University of Edinburgh, aiming to promote students' intercultural awareness and engagement before, during and upon return of an abroad experience for work, volunteer or study purposes. The name derives from the idea that when one culture meets another, something new –a third space- is created (Kramsch and Uryu, 2013). It consists of a series of activities that wrap around students' international experiences, offering tools to explore, reflect, engage, and share 'culture' during the different stages of an overseas adventure. In particular, the 3rd SP entails a pre-departure weekend retreat, an online and physical 'toolbox' and a returnees' conference. It was inspired by the University of Virginia's Cultural Orientation Reflection Engagement programme¹ but falls within the broader 'longitudinal' model of student support described above.

As explained, the 3rd Space aims to prepare students theoretically, but also to equip them with pertinent tools, attitudes and values that will support them through the experience abroad and upon return. The overall aims of the project were to enhance student learning and preparation in order to increase intercultural engagement; help decrease pre-departure anxiety and stereotyping; offer a sense of belonging; and provide a platform to share experiences upon return (Borghetti et al., 2015, Messelink et al., 2015).

¹ More information can be found in: <http://www.virginia.edu/iso/core/coreconcept.html>

The 3rd Space Pilot recruited 40 undergraduate students from across the University of Edinburgh (UoE) leaving in the summer of 2014 for their third year overseas and returning in the summer 2015. Students were invited to apply by submitting a cover letter discussing their understanding of the value of this programme, the impact it might have on their experience and demonstrating a general enthusiasm for the mission. Students who participated in the 3rd SP were also eligible for the Edinburgh Award (UoE), which recognises students' engagement with activities such as part-time work, volunteering etc in the classroom. In the following section we detail each phase of the 3rd Space Pilot.

2.1 Pre-departure phase: The Bon Voyage Retreat

In April 2014 the forty recruited students were invited to a two-day pre-departure 'Retreat'. The overall attitude that the 3rd Space Pilot attempted to promote was that of a 'reflexive inquirer', open to the mindful exploration of everyday life, whether this be at 'home' or in the places to which they were travelling to live, work and study. Through interactive workshops, students were introduced to relevant theoretical concepts such as culture shock, global citizenship and intercultural engagement. This aimed to help students formulate 'realistic' expectations about their upcoming experience and reduce anxiety. They were also offered the opportunity to develop their ability to reflect on, document and share their experiences through intensive ethnographic and storytelling workshops. Reflexivity and introspective writing are thought to advance critical engagement of intercultural behaviour and practice (Jackson, 2014a).

The workshop sessions, while theory-driven, were highly experiential and required active participation. The storytelling workshop sought both to impart story-crafting skills and to actively initiate a reflective process of individual and collective re-storying. Training in story-crafting skills was designed to give students the tools to create coherent narratives that could be shared either orally or in written form, particularly on the blog (see below). By actively engaging students in narrating their journey so far using these skills, the storytelling workshop drew on community-engaged narrative therapy approaches (Denborough, 2008), which have been developed and used to open people up to new possibilities for being and acting in the world (White, 2000). Through asking students to reflect on their own experiences using narrative practices, alongside the experiences shared by their peers, students were invited to begin the process of evolving the stories they tell about themselves. Novel experiences encountered through travels can only have a lasting impact on young people when they are given meaning through their incorporation into the stories they tell to themselves and to others about themselves (Cary, 2004).

At the end of the first day of the retreat small groups were invited to take the toolbox and 'test' one of the suggested activities through an exploration of Edinburgh, the city where they were living and studying. The next morning, after some brief additional direction, they set out on their explorations inspired (but not directed) by the prompts in the toolbox. In the late afternoon they returned and collaboratively prepared presentations about their experiences of exploration and their discoveries. They were encouraged to draw on their storytelling skills to do so. The results included a short movie about the deep-fried mars bar, a free-wheeling journey along the promenade at Portobello (a seaside neighborhood in the city), and a voyage which crisscrossed the city guided by strangers' suggestions of their favorite places. What was striking, is the extent to which they took students, who had after all been living and studying in Edinburgh for years, to places and situations that were wholly new to them. As suggested, encouraged by the prompts in the toolbox, they travelled beyond the 'familiar Edinburgh' and so learned something more about the life of the city. Moreover, drawing on storytelling techniques, they narrated these explorations to others in a way that was at once fun, informative and reflexive.

The highly experiential and participatory nature of the Weekend Retreat aimed to create a

'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that would bring students together under an umbrella of shared interests, passion and commitment and that would promote learning, as well as a sense of belonging. Establishing relationships and developing peer networks are important elements of an intercultural experience that can prevent culture shock and reduce anxiety (Jackson, 2014b).

During the pre-departure Retreat students received their set of the 3rd Space Toolbox and relevant guidance.

2.2 Sojourner Phase: The 3rd Space Toolbox

As suggested above, ideally, 'guided critical reflection should continue once the participants are in the host environment' (Jackson, 2014, p. 458). In line with this, the 3rd Space Team (with the help of a graphic designer recruited for this purpose) developed a physical and online toolbox of activities that promote exploration, reflexivity and intercultural engagement. Creating opportunities for the students to reflect on and document their experiences in creative ways is vital for their sense-making and appreciation of the intercultural experience (Penman and Ratz, 2015).

The physical toolbox consisted of a box that contained 30 A5 illustrated cards with the 3rd Space activities. The same activities had an online presence through a wordpress blog where students were given authorship access to upload and publish their reflections. Students were also welcome to comment on each other's work, which they did throughout the project. All 30 activities aimed to encourage students to learn something new about the host culture, reflect on their (cultural) identity and experience, and/or actively engage with local people. The latter was a central part of many activities, as negotiating relationships with people socialised in diverse cultures is thought to facilitate intercultural communication skills and understanding of sociopragmatic norms (Jackson, 2014).

Students have been invited to engage with as many activities as they wish to, either in print or online (blogging). The outcome has been impressive. From the 38 3rd Spacers (two dropped out), 24 students continue to be actively engaged (i.e. producing blogs) almost a year later. The following table presents the 'top five' activities, that is, the activities that students have blogged about more frequently:

Activity	Description	Number of Blogs
Local food	Try a local food, ideally from a street vendor. Describe it. Is it representative of the local cuisine; connected with the country's history or its resources? Ask for the recipe and cook it for a friend. Is there anything interesting about the ingredients/cooking technique? Now, modify the recipe adding a twist from your own cuisine. Try it out on some local friends or the vendor.	10
Beautiful buildings	Ask a local person to name what they think to be the most beautiful buildings in the town/city. Ask them to describe it and explain why they find it so beautiful. Go to the building and take a	8

	photograph of it.	
Go team!	Go to a bar where people watch sports and join them. Ask someone who they support and why. Start supporting this team/player. Follow this team/player in the local media or at a live game. Be happy when they win and sad when they lose (be mindful of local passions; be voluble in your support in appropriate company...)	7
My favourite place	Tell us about your favourite spot in your new 'home'. Post a picture and tell us what makes it so special. Before you come back make sure you had at least one opportunity to chat with someone else who frequents this same spot...what do they like about it?	7
Local expressions	Identify local expressions that you find interesting. What do they mean and when are they used? Why do you find them interesting? Is there any equivalent expression in your own language? If there is, can you explain or trace the origins of the two expressions?	6

Table 1: Top five 3rd Space activities

Currently (April 2015), the 3rd Space online Toolbox blog consists of 142 published posts². Blogging is an integral component of our programme. In their posts, students narrate the novel experiences they had whilst engaging with the toolbox activities. By reflexively storying these experiences, students integrate them into their personal stories. By publishing them, the new ways of being and acting in the world that have emerged out of this reflexive space where experience meets narrative are voiced in a supportive community. By reading and commenting on each other's posts, they create a supportive narrative community in which new understandings of themselves and the world can be nurtured. This sense of community is also fostered through a social media (Facebook) group managed by one 3rd Space Team member. In this space, the sojourners have the opportunity to ask questions and receive support while being away, as well as share experiences and engage with the 3rd Space community.

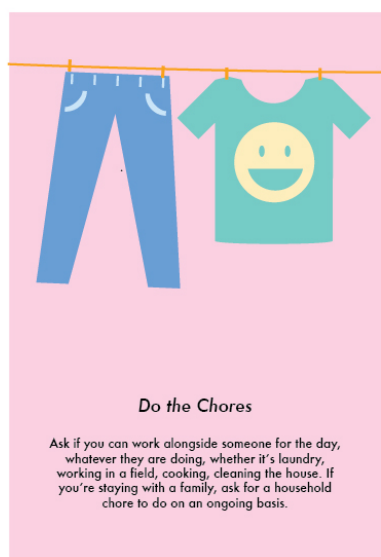
In what follows, we present two (unedited) blog posts, which showcase the students' creative engagement with the 3rd Space Toolbox activities and the shifts in identity and understanding that emerge out of the reflexive process of storying their experiences.

Case A: Do the Chores activity

"Summer holidays are coming to an end in Australia. With the beginning of new semester approaching I found myself searching for a place to live. University halls promise comfort to exchange students, excusing them from doing certain chores and offering company of

² All blogs can be found at: <https://3rdspaceproject.wordpress.com/welcome/>

people similarly lost in an unknown country. However, it's easy to become lazy when surrounded by exchange students and fail to befriend local people. So, I have settled for living with two Australian guys and a cat in an apartment above mechanic's workshop in an industrial suburb of Sydney. See, that holds a promise of authentic experience. However, my two new flatmates lived on their own for quite a while. Some rearranging was required to find some space for me between piles of books, boxes of unknown content, vinyls, milk crates, bits of electronics of unknown origin and purpose, random pieces of furniture, plants and cat toys. So I have joined them on all-day quest to move furniture, get rid of things that are not need and find a home for things that are being used. In thirty-five degree heat of Australian summer we have emptied one of the rooms by moving all of its contents out in the corridor and living room. Once we were finished we were trapped in the room by all of the boxes and bags blocking the way out. I have ended up ruining a few spider households vacuuming, while my flatmate moved around an ancient wardrobe standing on little wooden lion paws. The cat didn't make things easier by jumping around in panic, terrified by all of the sudden changes. Once the furniture was rearranged, the true challenge began. We have spent hours going through contents of various boxes and making decisions about their destiny. We have found about ten different hats, books on Freudian psychoanalysis and clash of physics and religion, two model boats, a collection of bottle caps



and Pokemon cards, six Rubik cubes, a ring with my initials, a typewriter and endless posters with movie stars. Even after putting away half of it for donation, we still ended up having trouble finding space for what was left. And this is when I have learned how to make shelves out of milk crates, which can be easily disassembled and used for moving. Whole process kept us busy until late hours of the evening, however we have succeeded in making the apartment a livable space for all of us.

I have been moving around a lot since I have left my parent's house at the age of seventeen. As a result I need to be very conscious of how much I own. I must be able to put all of my belonging in a single suitcase so I can move somewhere else again. Therefore, I have trained myself to avoid keeping anything that is not absolutely necessary, I do now own anything that holds

any sentimental value. It was quite strange and entertaining having to deal with endless piles of things, which origins and purpose were puzzling even for their owners. And I have realized that while my belongings are truly impersonal, in the belongings of my flatmates contained is their life story. Boxes full of childhood pictures and old teddy bears whisper stories about their childhood, while piles of books and notes and artefacts tell a story of their adulthood. I feel like it was worth the effort to get to know the people I will be living with a little better.”
Monika, Sydney.

Case B: Body Language

“Since being in France, it has been hard not to notice the different ways the French communicate with each other. I’ve only experienced the “rude and moody” stereotype once since I’ve been here- although it could not have come at a worse time; on my first day, speaking to my first french person. It may have caused a few tears, and a lot of dread for the coming months, but since then all French people have been more than welcoming!

Their greetings, I think, are the things that stand out the most. They are really important to the French, and if you forget to greet them in the appropriate way, they can take real offence!

First of all, there is the kissing! Two kisses! Every time you meet someone. Every time you say goodbye. Its so intimate I'm still having to get used to it! There have been a few awkward "almost bumping heads with other pairs of kissing friends" moments but I'm getting there! Plus, the kissing can also be advantageous when there are any nice-looking people around...The French, and my international friends (who all tend to kiss just once), always ask what we do to greet each other and my response is always a bit vague. What do we really do?! We shake hands with people we meet for the first time, we hug if we're close friends, but I still have no clue what we do to show we're glad to meet a friend on the street! I need to introduce the kissing in Scotland. Every response I get when I say "we shake hands when being introduced" comes with an aghast expression and a comment on how the "British are cold people!". Every time without fail!

And with regards to the people we don't know so well, and kissing is

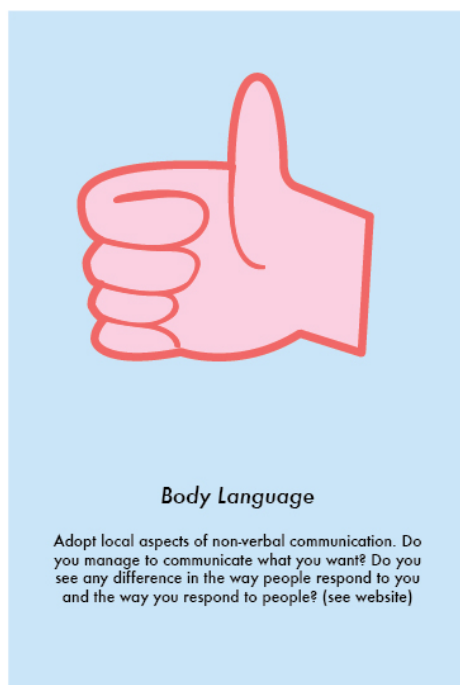
not appropriate (I'm still learning when this is), you always give a wide smile and a "Bonjour" or "Bonsoir!". While passing everyone in halls, even if you've never met them before, you always say hello. Its not even considered polite, it is a neccessity! From this, I have no idea where the French got their reputation of being rude; its definitely not the case here!

And I have also found their general conduct when just chatting to their friends is very intimate. They're always very close to you, whether just close by or by putting their arm around you or other physical contact (but that's to a cold British girl), and its made me realise how little we British really make physical contact. Its never even crossed my mind before but now when someone is talking to me, I am always conscious of the closeness. It definitely needs a bit of getting used to.

The French are also very expressive with their hand gestures, and with parts of speech which don't mean anything. I've found its very common for them to blow raspberries when they are not happy with something. The gestures, and the raspberries, are so helpful to me though- as even with my limited French, although it is definitely improving, I understand a lot of whats going on by piecing together what I understand of the conversation and the way they are acting.

So overall, with the kissing, the closeness and the expressions- the French do not do things in halves! But I'm getting used to it and 'm sure I won't even think anything of it in a couple of months!"

Anonymous



In these two blog posts one can see how the process of engaging with toolbox activities designed to engage students with local cultures, then reflected on and narrated in public has facilitated these two students in shifting their understandings of both their own identities and the cultures in which they are currently embedded. These shifts are not merely at a conceptual level but operate at a very personal level, opening up new ways of being and acting in the world.

2.3 Re-entry Phase: The Welcome Home Conference

The third phase of the 3rd Space pilot consists of the Welcome Home Conference. A two-day student-led conference has been organised for October 2015 to enable students to share their experiences from their year abroad. Having the opportunity to reflect on one's experience and communicate it to others is a vital step to further self-enhancement (Jackson, 2014a) and, as such, an important component of the 3rd SP. During this conference, the 3rd Space Team will also work collaboratively with the students to develop ways in which the Pilot can become an ongoing student-led provision.

3 Closing thoughts - Evaluation of the 3rd Space Project

Given the 3rd Space Pilot's ground-breaking nature, the Team wished to evaluate its structure, use and impact. As Jackson (2014b) suggests, education abroad programmes ought to be evaluated for refinement. As a result, the Team designed the 3rd Space Evaluation project, which aims to explore the ways in which the 3rd Space Pilot impacted upon students' intercultural experiences abroad (outcome and impact evaluation); and supported students while living abroad and upon return, with particular attention to culture shock and reverse culture shock (support evaluation). The evaluation will also help establish what worked well and what worked less well in the programming and resources supplied, with a view to improving these in future developments of the project. And finally, the evaluation will identify ways of engaging students in the future development and establishment of an ongoing Third Space Project (sustainability).

The Team has collected quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interview) data from the pre-departure weekend; and qualitative data from the 'sojourner' phase (reflexive narratives). We are also analysing the blogging activities of each student. Additionally, the Welcome Home conference will include a 'world café' event³ to evaluate not only the overall resources provided, but to also investigate the role that the current 3rd Spacers would like to have in the project's future development. As the 3rd Space Evaluation is currently ongoing, future publications will disseminate these findings, contributing further to the advancement of knowledge on training and support provisions on intercultural engagement. We would like, however, to close this paper with the reflections of one student on how participation in the 3rd Space Pilot has benefited her overall experience abroad. We think that this excerpt summarises eloquently the aims and rationale of the 3rd Space Pilot, namely advancing reflexivity and intercultural engagement while supported by a student-led community of practice:

'Third Space definitely made me think more about what I am getting from my university exchange. I am realizing more how all the experiences that I have gained during the last seven month could affect and hopefully improve the wide range of skills that we were discussing and writing on the board during the weekend retreat last year. Moreover, I really appreciate the network of students on exchange that we have thanks to Third Space. I do not feel alone but rather as a part of the exchange group of people. Everything seems easier when there are more of us dealing with the same problems.'

³ World Café is a creative research method where the research team constructs a café-like setting and invites groups of 'experts' to sit around tables and, with the help of 'hosts', to engage in collaborative dialogue, share knowledge and ideas. Participants are asked to rotate around the tables and work with different people, thus creating a living network of discussions and actions.

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